

VZCZCXRO7345  
RR RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHDBU #1255/01 2471104  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 041104Z SEP 07  
FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0886  
RUCPDO/USDOC WASHDC 0184  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2247  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2236  
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 0053  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2197  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1978  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2030  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC  
RHMFIUU/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 2746

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 DUSHANBE 001255

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [ECIN](#) [ELTN](#) [TI](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: TAJIK-AFGHAN BRIDGE OPENS IN STYLE

REF: DUSHANBE 1253

DUSHANBE 00001255 001.2 OF 003

¶1. (U) On August 26, after 19 months of construction led by the Afghan Engineering Division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, \$37 million in U.S. funding, 19,100 cubic meters of concrete, and countless demarches and interventions by the Embassy to secure building materials and licenses, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, and U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez officially opened the new bridge linking Nizhniy Pyanj, Tajikistan and Sher Khan Bander, Afghanistan. The 673 meter span across the Pyanj River is designed to handle 1000 trucks a day and withstand the largest floods and strongest earthquakes known to occur in this seismically active region.

A Little bit of Vision...

=====

¶2. (U) Each of the three principals at the opening recognized the historic importance of this bridge, linking not just Tajikistan and Afghanistan, but Central and South Asia. Both Karzai and Rahmon spoke about their nations' historic role as "places in between" the great trading empires and evoked the image of the Great Silk Road to describe their future role in a revived transcontinental trade route, criss-crossed by caravans of Kamaz trucks instead of camels. Such trade links had been all but severed for centuries during the "Great Game" and subsequent Soviet domination of Central Asia. The bridge almost halves the distance from Dushanbe to a seaport. A renovated spur road links Sher Khan Bander to Kunduz and to Afghanistan's quickly developing network of newly constructed roads. On the Tajik side, the Japanese government has already initiated road repairs from the bridge north to Qurghon-Teppa, Chinese loans and Asian Development Bank grants are financing construction of roads north from Dushanbe, and Iran continues work on a tunnel through the Anzob pass.

... and a Big Dose of Reality

=====

¶3. (U) Lofty aspirations notwithstanding, the three principals

also recognized the daunting tasks remaining to make the new Silk Road a reality. President Rahmon's speech at the ribbon cutting called for joint efforts by Tajikistan, Afghanistan and the international community to ensure the bridge will not be used for evil purposes, such as drug trafficking or movement of terrorists, and President Karzai noted that much work remains in order to develop the full potential of the bridge. Secretary Gutierrez was more specific, echoing points he raised in private meetings with the Tajik and Afghan leaders: customs officials and border guards from the two sides need to collaborate more closely. Press covering the event also raised the specter of a poorly managed bridge facilitating illicit trade in Afghan narcotics.

14. (SBU) Tajik and Afghan officials recognize this danger too, and in the weeks leading up to the opening ceremony, we observed a few promising signs that the Tajiks might overcome their predisposition not to deal with their Afghan counterparts. Embassy staff were instrumental in prodding local border officials on either side of the still incomplete bridge to sit down together and begin discussing standard operating procedures for the bridge. A week prior to the ceremony during a reconnaissance trip to the bridge, the Ambassador met with the Tajik Governor of Khatlon and the Afghan Governor of Kunduz literally at the center of the 673-meter span, where the governors informed her that they would be ready to operate on the Monday following the ceremony, allowing 50 cars to pass in either direction. Comment: This is a small start, but not unreasonable given the fact that the border facilities on either side of the bridge are still several weeks from completion. We plan to use President Rahmon's "promise" to cooperate with the Afghans to press the Tajik border guards to conduct joint training programs with their neighbors to the south, and to obtain better treatment from Tajik consuls for Afghan businessmen applying for visas. End comment.

What's in a Name?

DUSHANBE 00001255 002.2 OF 003

=====

15. (SBU) After two years of work on the bridge and a gala opening ceremony, there is still no consensus on what to call the bridge. People on the Tajik side of the river tend to refer to it as the Nizhniy Pyanj bridge (or Panji Payon in Tajiki) after the small village nearest the Tajik bridgehead. People on the Afghan side usually refer to it as the Sher Khan Bander bridge for similar reasons. In his opening speech, President Rahmon settled on the name "Friendship Bridge" (Puli Dusti), which resonates well with Tajiks who are used to such Soviet-era formulations and because the larger town an hour from the bridge is called Dusti (friendship). As he read out his speech, however, the large banner unfurled below the podium read simply "Puli Panji Payon" (Nizhniy Pyanj Bridge). Nor did President Karzai take up Rahmon's suggested moniker, although he said the bridge symbolized the connections and friendship between the Afghan and Tajik people. Karzai may also be more sensitive to the fact that a different bridge downstream, built by the Soviets at Termez, Uzbekistan was named the "Friendship Bridge" and was later used to invade Afghanistan. In addition, the name "Tajik-Afghan Friendship Bridge" is already in use elsewhere (and has its own Wikipedia entry), referring to one of the smaller bridges across the Pyanj built by the Aga Khan Development Network.

16. (U) Naming the river is also a bit confusing. The Pyanj (a Russianized variant of the Persian Panj) is the main tributary to the Amu Darya. Most maps use the label Amu Darya once the Pyanj meets the Vakhsh River, just downstream from the new bridge and before it flows to Uzbekistan. Some Afghans tend to include the entire Pyanj as part of the Amu Darya. Since Alexander's armies came this way, Westerners have called the river the Oxus. And some ancient texts and many current residents still refer to it as the Jayhun -- one of the four rivers which watered the Garden of Eden.

=====

¶7. (SBU) President Rahmon relished his role as host of the bridge opening ceremonies. He presided over lavish multi-course meals, including a dinner at a new presidential "dacha" complex which is being expanded to accommodate the Commonwealth of Independent States summit in October. The new dacha overlooks the Palace of the Nation also in the last stages of construction -- by the same Italian contractor who built the bridge -- and reputed to cost close to \$90 million so far. The grandeur continued after the dinner with a presidentially guided tour of the government dacha compound where the Afghan and American delegations spent the night. The dacha compound continues to grow, with whole neighborhoods displaced to make room for additional conference halls and guest houses. The tour included a look inside the new sports complex built just for Rahmon. It includes an indoor tennis court, Olympic sized pool, multiple work-out rooms, sauna complex, and billiard hall, where Karzai successfully tried his hand at Rahmon's favorite game. The crowning achievement of the complex is an imposing domed edifice with five stories and room after room of over-the-top opulence. The building can house four heads of state at the same time. Standing on the roof and looking out at the lights of the city (note: much of the city was without lights for five months last winter due to electricity shortages), Secretary of Commerce Gutierrez asked the Ambassador what she was thinking. The Ambassador replied that she was thinking about the half of the Tajik population living below the poverty line.

¶8. (SBU) Rahmon appears to be enjoying the trappings of royalty more and more. After a beautiful recitation of Persian poetry set to music at the dinner in Dushanbe, Rahmon summoned his favorite singer to the bridge opening ceremony the next day, where he displaced some of the locally arranged musical groups and sang for almost 10 minutes about the virtues of the president. (Rahmon's other favorite singer also came to the bridge where she delivered a kitschy but climate-appropriate rendition of Gershwin's Summertime in accented English.) Rahmon is too young and healthy to stir speculation about an heir, but we did spot his young son accompanying him down the bridge toward the ribbon cutting. Slightly more troubling, official

DUSHANBE 00001255 003.2 OF 003

state-owned Tajik press covering the event omitted the information about the bridge being funded by the United States. The credit all goes to Rahmon.

¶9. (SBU) Despite their differences in style, Rahmon genuinely enjoyed his time with Karzai. Rahmon personally drove Karzai 40 minutes outside Dushanbe to visit the historic sites of Hissor and enjoy a picnic at the central bank chief's private dacha. Later Rahmon joked to the American delegation that because of the Afghans' presence, we would have to settle for a "traditional cup of tea" at the dinner -- meaning we would have to keep the vodka hidden in tea-cups. An hour later in the Tajik-Afghan-U.S. trilateral, Rahmon repeated the joke to Karzai himself, who decided to interpret it literally. At one point during the dinner, Rahmon's foreign policy advisor, Erkin Rahmatulloev, poured some vodka into Afghan Foreign Minister Spanta's juice, but overall surprisingly little vodka was consumed. Perhaps the early morning start to the bridge was on everyone's mind.

JACOBSON